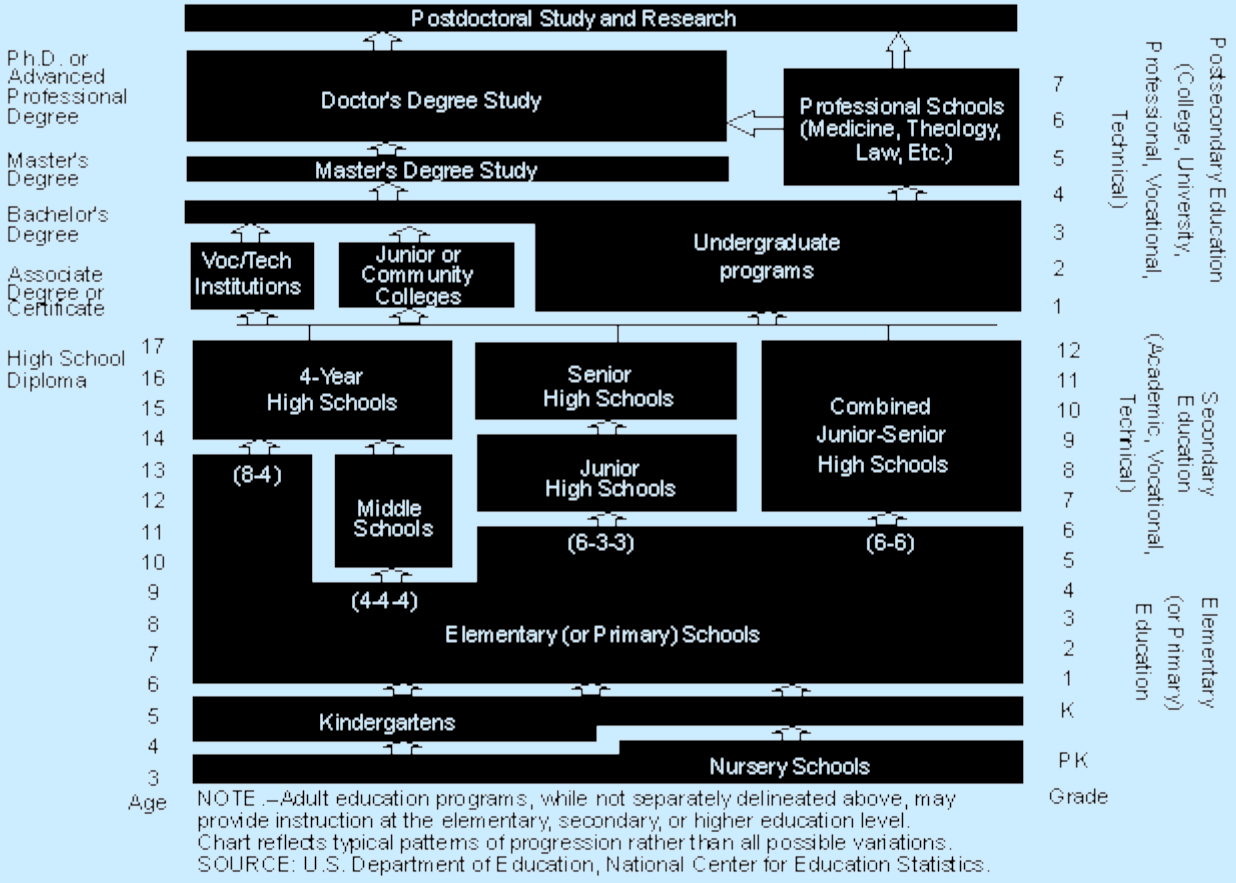
1. The American School System

1.1. General Information

The American education system is unlike that in many other countries. Education is primarily the responsibility of state and local government, and so there is little standardization in the curriculum, for example. The individual states have great control over what is taught in their schools and over the requirements that a student must meet, and they are also responsible for the funding of schooling. Therefore, there is huge variation regarding courses, subjects, and other activities – it always depends on where the school is located. Still, there are some common points, as e.g. the division of the education system into three levels: elementary/primary education, secondary education, and postsecondary/higher education (college or university).

The following chart can be found at: http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/edlite-map.html

Map of the U.S. Education System



Formal schooling lasts 12 years, until around age 18. Compulsory schooling, though, ends by age 16 in most states; the remaining states require students to attend school until they are 17 or 18. All children in the United States have access to free public schools. Private schools (religious and non-sectarian) are available, but students must pay tuition to attend them.

In the following description of the U.S. education structure, we will focus only on the first two levels: primary and secondary schools.

1.2. Structure

U.S. educators frequently use the terms K-12 education, and sometimes PK-12 education, to refer to all primary and secondary education from pre-school prior to the first year or grade through secondary graduation. One of the following three patterns usually prevails in the community:

- Elementary school (K-5), middle school (6-8), high school (9-12);
- Elementary school (K-6), junior high school (7-9), senior high school (9-12); or
- Elementary school (K-8), high school (9-12).

➢ The majority of U.S. children begin their educations prior to entering regular school. Parents who send their children to pre-schools/nursery schools (age 2-4) and kindergartens (age 5-6) have to finance these institutions privately. Children learn the alphabet, colors, and other elementary basics.

➢ U.S. children enter formal schooling around age 6. The first pattern (see above) is the most common one. Elementary students are typically in one classroom with the same teacher most of the day.

➢ After elementary school, students proceed to middle school, where they usually move from class to class each period, with a new teacher and a new mixture of students in every class. Students can select from a wide range of academic classes and elective classes.

➢ In high school, students in their first year are called *freshman*, in their second year *sophomore*, in their third year *junior*, and in their last and fourth year *senior*. There is an even greater variety of subjects than before. Students must earn a certain number of credits (which they get for a successfully completed course) in order to graduate and be awarded with a High School Diploma – there is no final examination like in many other countries.